

John Hickenlooper Thinks He Can Unite America, Bloopers and All

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Highlight: The Democratic Party has never nominated a presidential candidate from west of the Central time zone. The former governor of Colorado believes he can change that.

Body

ROCHESTER, N.H. — In its 191-year history, the Democratic Party has never nominated a presidential candidate from west of the Central time zone.

Against long odds, John Hickenlooper, the lanky former governor of Colorado, believes he can change that.

“What I’m really good at,” he said recently, sitting in the back seat of his campaign’s Chevy Tahoe, “is what this country most needs right now.”

Since announcing his candidacy for president in early March, Mr. Hickenlooper has stayed at the bottom of the polls, gained just a bump on Twitter and made major news only once, after telling CNN he accidentally watched an X-rated movie with his mother.

He’s a 67-year-old white man in a field of potentially history-making candidates, and he has far less name recognition or fund-raising muscle than former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., who announced his official campaign last week. As voters have flocked to the formerly unknown Pete Buttigieg, mayor of South Bend, Ind., Mr. Hickenlooper has failed to attract a buzz.

But Mr. Hickenlooper says he is simply waiting for his moment. As governor, he brought together warring factions across the Rockies — environmentalists and oil companies, gun owners and regulators, cities and suburbs — and he’s betting that a candidate from the politically purple, deeply pragmatic Mountain West is exactly what America needs. (To be clear some past Democratic nominees, like John Kerry, were born in the West. But none built their careers in the region.)

“Everybody said it was impossible,” Mr. Hickenlooper told a crowd in a packed bar in Concord, N.H., standing on a pair of stools as he ran through his history of compromise. “Well, it wasn’t.”

Candidates from the Mountain West have long struggled to make it to the White House. Many of their states’ primaries have happened later in the cycle, and because of the region’s vast distances and small populations, they’ve often drawn on less support than their opponents. Colorado, despite its recent boom, is still a state of fewer than six million people.

But Colorado is in many ways a microcosm of America. Split nearly evenly among Democrats, Republicans and independents, it has significant rural and Hispanic populations and has been ground zero for many of the nation’s most contentious debates over guns, climate change, marijuana and more. Mr. Hickenlooper believes his success in the state will help him attract a diversity of voters on the national stage, even as his skeptics warn that Colorado, with its bipartisan spirit, isn’t really a mirror of a nation now pulled apart by partisanship.

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In the Chevy Tahoe, shuttling toward his next event, Mr. Hickenlooper spoke about what he called the nation's "crisis of division" and about identifying "bigger picture places, where we can bring people together." Among them: untangling bureaucracy and ramping up job training in the face of a shifting economy.

In his stump speech, Mr. Hickenlooper speaks about going "beyond just defeating Donald Trump" and fixing all the ways government isn't working for Americans.

In New Hampshire, many voters were charmed but not entirely convinced.

"At this point, I'd have to wait and see," said Patricia Shearin, 54, who wanted Mr. Hickenlooper to speak more urgently about climate change.

"I liked him a lot," said Michael Behrendt, 63, "but this is not about coming together. This is about defeating a criminal and defeating a party that has lost its way."

Mr. Hickenlooper, who grew up outside of Philadelphia, moved to Colorado in 1981 to work as a geologist in the oil and gas industry. After opening one of the state's first microbreweries, he invested in what became a small empire of Midwestern pubs and restaurants.

As governor from 2011 until 2019, he nudged the state to the left, passing universal background checks and civil unions, expanding Medicaid and granting drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants, all while creating one of the top economies in the country. Teen pregnancy plummeted in Colorado while he was in office, thanks to a birth control program, and broadband will soon be available to nearly every city and town in the state. For much of his tenure, he worked with a divided legislature.

His allies say his deal-making skills lie in an ability to force battling factions to the table and then make them feel collectively responsible for a solution. He can also be an incrementalist, they say, demanding that adversaries move — but not too far or too fast.

As a candidate, Mr. Hickenlooper is pushing middle-of-the-road policies: Universal health care, but not a single-payer system. Swift action on climate change, but not the Green New Deal. He says he is likely to put a Republican in his cabinet and would choose a woman as his running mate.

He is also banking on his ability to charm.

He often speaks about growing up as a skinny, dyslexic kid who learned to neutralize bullies with humor; as an adult, he's turned into his state's gregarious geek-in-chief. His stump speeches are packed with self-effacing jokes, and friends say his deepest desire is to be liked — to connect with his audience.

This freewheeling personality has won him many a political and business deal. It has also caused him to fumble in ways that might be problematic if he were to get to the White House. He once introduced his lieutenant governor as a "rising sex star," flubbing a joke in an audience of grade-schoolers, only to make a similar mistake a few days later. (It's unclear what Mr. Hickenlooper was trying to say, though in the past he had called his deputy both a "rising star" and a "sex symbol.")

Reporters have called these "Hickenbloopers." Aides have called it his foot-in-mouth problem.

His skeptics have accused him of hiding behind compromise and using it to avoid taking firm stances on pressing issues. That criticism is sometimes lobbed at him when it comes to the environment.

As governor, Mr. Hickenlooper developed some of the country's strictest oil and gas regulations, passed a first-in-the-nation methane capture rule and helped to make Colorado one of just 10 states to receive more than 20 percent of its electricity from renewables. On the campaign trail, he speaks often about the economic and moral incentive to move fast on climate change.

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But among critics, he's been known as "Frackenlooper" for years. Oil production in Colorado hit a record during his administration, and some environmentalists have faulted him for not doing more to rein in the industry that once employed him.

In 2014, when a left-of-center contingent pushed for a measure that could have significantly limited drilling, Mr. Hickenlooper brokered a deal to keep the proposal off the ballot. As part of the agreement, he formed a commission that would examine contentious oil and gas issues.

His allies called it a brilliant compromise. With climate action stalled, they say, a president who can push Republicans and industry to act is exactly what the country needs.

"He got me in my industry to do things I never thought were possible," said Tisha Schuller, a former president of the Colorado Oil and Gas Association.

Some, though, accused him of subverting democracy. With the United Nations predicting that dire effects of climate change are just over a decade away, they say, compromise is not enough.

"If he is staking himself as the climate change candidate because of what he did in Colorado," said Kelly Ohlson, a former mayor of Fort Collins, Colo., "we're all in trouble."

Right now, the biggest question hanging over Mr. Hickenlooper seems to be whether America is even interested in the consensus he claims he can achieve.

"Am I going to be able to get that message out?" he asked, before climbing out of his campaign SUV and heading into a packed bar, where a crowd awaited.

"Am I going to raise enough money to — can I find the slogan that encapsulates it in some way? That, in this modern, sound-bite world, catches it? We'll see."

PHOTOS: Former Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado heading to a campaign event in New Hampshire last month, above, and at stops in Lebanon, N.H., below left, and Newmarket, N.H. Mr. Hickenlooper has failed to attract a buzz since declaring his candidacy in early March, but he says he is simply waiting for his moment. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRISTAN SPINSKI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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